

Nature, Territoriality, and the Imaginary

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Increasingly new digital imaging techniques are creating a world on their own terms, the conference outline reads. Images, especially digital ones, are en vogue. Digital imaging technologies stand for an increasing liquefaction of boundaries. But what does it mean for the cognitive side of architecture. In a recent essay in *Hunch*¹ Peter Eisenman writes that there seems to be a new subject in architecture, the mix of students, clients, and critics that has changed. This new subject is inundated by media, information and images, and has less motivation for more interpretative kinds of information. There is less and less interest in a close reading of the design. I do not believe however that the continuous re-invention of new concepts like 'the fold', 'the index', 'the projective' and more recently 'the post-indexical' as suggested in *Hunch*, will help us much in understanding what is going on in architecture and its digital techniques.

Before we go to the architectural discourse, we first have to address more general notions of (human) nature, bio-sphere, and information society. How do we address these questions? The concept of human nature is highly complex; I will not strictly follow the problem of what is called 'the post humanist subject' as it is already well presented in current cultural discourse or theory. I will address the problem of '*digital worlds*' and *artificiality* from the problem of '*grounding*', and the necessity of a spatio-temporal '*re-framing*' (as in representation and production) of architectural thought in terms of the organic and inorganic in order to get at ways in which we may rethink the possibility of action and agency in our times. Cyberspace in particular, forces human beings to re-conceptualize their spatial situation inasmuch as they experience their positions in cyberspace only as simulations in some 'virtual life' form, Timothy Luke has argued.² His argument is that we might need another reasoning to capture our present digital worlds. The epistemological foundations of conventional reasoning in terms of political realism are grounded in the modernist laws of *second nature*, he writes. Today we might need another epistemic notion on what is real and what is virtual as the conference suggests. In taking up the notions of 'first' and 'second' nature, Luke

defines the '*third nature*' as informational cybersphere/telesphere. Digitalization shifts human agency and structure to a register of informational bits away from one of manufactured matter. Human presence gets located in the interplay of the two modes of nature's influence. *First nature* gains its identity from the different terrains forming the bioscape/ecoscape/geoscape of *terrestrially*, Luke writes. Earth, water and sky provide the basic elements mapped in physical geographies of the biosphere that in turn influence human life with natural forces. Second nature finds its expression on the technoscape/socioscape of *territoriality*. The actions of people, cities, economies, states constitute these spaces of territoriality. My main concern is how to understand our own actions in relation to nature and the possible architectural and urban solutions. The concept of *action* is a complicated one, one thing is sure, it is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled, as Bruno Latour writes.³ Both architecture and urbanism play an important role in the understanding of *third nature* as digitalized work processes and digital architectures, and their relation to first and second nature and its forms of cyberscape and mediascape of *telemetricity*. It is difficult, if not impossible to say where these systems begin or end, where solutions to the environment might be found, what kind of agreement we might reach to solve architectural and urban problems. It is not that technologies mediate between the human and the natural, Elizabeth Grosz writes, for that is to construe technology as somehow outside either the natural or the human, instead of seeing it as the indefinite extension of both the human and the natural and as their point of overlap, the point of conversion of the one into the other.⁴ And that will make the discussion on possible solutions quite complex. There is indeed a witches' brew of political and environmental arguments, concepts and difficulties that can conveniently be the basis of endless academic, intellectual, theoretical and philosophical debate, as David Harvey writes.⁵ Some common language has to be found, he writes, or at least an adequate way of translating between different languages. His common ground is in '*the web of life*' metaphor, it might indeed help us to filter our actions through the web of interconnections that make up the living world, a notion that comes close to Latour's idea of his 'actor-network-theory' (ANT). Cultural theory has tended to think in terms of binary oppositions. Oppositions between closed and open subjects and infinity; between cognitive and aesthetic individualism, it has appeared as nature and culture, capitalism and schizophrenia, identity and difference. Scott Lash argues that there is a *third party* or a third space involved. This third

party is not to be confused with the earlier mentioned 'third nature'. The third party is not a fold, it is not an index, or the post-indexical, it is finally not any sort of reconciliation of totality and infinity, or even the notions of the beautiful and sublime. The third space for him is a *ground*, an underneath, a base in the sense of basis.⁶ We are reflexively judging animals, thus ground is in *perception and community*. Both notions are under a lot of pressure with our new digital technologies.

I can agree with Elizabeth Grosz who writes that we have to be careful with the computer-associated technologies with their promise of virtual realities.⁷ By 'virtual space' she understands a system of computer simulations of three-dimensional spaces, themselves laid out within a more generalized space, known as cyberspace. Virtual realities are computer generated and acting as a partial homology for 'real' space within it is located. 'The Reality of the Imaginary' is that it is partial, we need to consider first and second nature too. Like Timothy Luke, Elisabeth Grosz also sees that it is more and more difficult to separate cyberspace (the space of software) from real space. Virtual spaces are interactive environments, the crucial ingredient here is a responding subject, the 'wetware', located in real space. The subject does not really direct or control the action she says, as well as participate in a virtual environment. She relates virtual reality to the promise of a paradoxical contact at a distance, with the famous example of virtual sex. Luke's definition of the nation state, mass society and global geopolitics as historical artefacts used for constructing and conquering the built environments or social spaces of second nature can help us along this path. Second nature is the technoscape/socioscape/ethnoscape of *territoriality*. Luke might also be right that many of the changes today cannot be fully understood with these two concepts alone. The elaborate human constructions become overlaid, interpenetrated and reconstituted with a 'third nature' of an informational cybersphere or telesphere, he argues. As a new concept we might want to see this in a Deleuzian way of a *contour*, a configuration, a constellation of an event to come. It will also have more and more implications on the way we deal with architecture and urbanism.

Architectural and urban design are deeply involved in what Luke calls 'third nature'. Until recently design was involved in first and second nature, but with digitalization it has entered a third nature. This is not only a question of the 'means' of designing, it has, and will, influence our ways of seeing and experiencing architecture and the city. It has caused that increasing liquefaction between the digital and material world. Grosz might be right that with computerization we are changing the very notion of tool or technology itself. Architectural design will more and more depend on these digital

tools than we might think possible right now. It will most certainly have effects on what till so far we consider *ground*, or *city* and *body*. But it does not mean that the virtual reality of computer space is fundamentally different from the virtual reality of writing, drawing, or even thinking, Grosz writes. The virtual is at the same time the space of the new, the un-thought, the unrealized. But the capacity for simulation has sensory and corporeal limits that are rarely acknowledged. To my mind these corporeal limits and sensory capacities are vital for architecture, and are too easily and unjustified moved out of the way. Let's briefly see how this might work out for an advanced position as in Peter Eisenman. Eisenman is one of the major theoreticians in the American architectural world with a steady interest in philosophical questions.

Traditionally, Eisenman writes, architecture was place bound, linked to a condition of experience.⁸ Eisenman refers to the comparable notions Luke is writing about, mediated environments challenge the givens of classical time, the time of experience. Writing about his Rebstockpark project for Frankfurt, Eisenman writes that architecture can no longer be bound by the static conditions of space and place. To his mind architecture must deal with new conditions like the 'event'.⁹ Rebstock is seen as an unfolding event. Events like a rock concert where one becomes part of the environment, he says. That is a peculiar reading of Deleuze's notion of event in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze speaks of a field of virtual structures, namely events. Events are not bodies but, properly speaking, incorporeal entities. They are not physical qualities and properties, but rather logical or dialectical attributes. Events belong to the virtual field, they are 'ideal by nature', and should not be confused with their 'spatio-temporal realizations in states of affairs'. Statements about events are fundamentally different from statements about physical qualities and properties. Events are not what occurs, but are rather inside what occurs. To Eisenman's mind architectural theory has largely ignored this idea of event. Instead theory has focussed on notions of figure and ground. For Eisenman there seem to be two ways of dealing with this conceptual pair; one leading to contextualism, and one leading to a *tabula rasa* like the modern movement imagined. With architectural modernism there is no relationship between old and new or between figure and ground. What I will do at the end of my lecture is show you a project that deals with this figure-ground relation. The project is digitalized in film, it escapes the binary positions Eisenman is referring to by using digital techniques to produce the transition from the virtual to the real. This transition is neither a jump cut nor a linear process, but a conceptually guided mediating process. I am using Latour's notion of 'mediators' here, which he dis-

tinguishes form 'intermediaries'. The intermediary transports meaning or force without transformation, input and output do not have different qualities. For mediators the input is never a good predictor for the output, mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry, he writes.¹⁰ I will argue from a position not circumscribed by the American discourse in my opening, but by social theories that are intended to make life better; discourses that seek not only to make social life intelligible but also to make it more just and humane. It involves first and second nature too. My argument will be that with contemporary digital techniques like 'foldings', 'blobs' and 'post-indexical procedures', we are at risk of finally losing all ground. My Northwest Passage (to speak with the Situationists), is that we need more *ground* and *permanence in the architectural imagery itself*. If society is organized in appearance as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard have insisted on, then it can only be contested in the field of appearance. Seen from an architectural perspective it means that blobs take the city as an additive texture without any coherence, technically they consume too much space since they want to stand on their own imagined pedestals like the present architectures in Dubai. Ideologically they have no concept of the city. They reinforce urban sprawl, instead of more compact building, they spread out. There is indifference to the environment, grounding in a more literal sense is no issue. In that sense it is different from an earlier artificial conception as in Koolhaas' *City of the Captive Globe* (1972) (also devoted to an artificial conception). They lack Koolhaas accelerated birth of theories, interpretations, mental constructions, proposals and their infliction on the World. In Koolhaas' world in the capital of Ego, science, art, poetry and forms of madness compete under ideal conditions to invent, destroy and restore the world of phenomenal Reality. Koolhaas' plots are like folds all on identical pedestals, but what they generate is difference. I think I can agree with Scott Lash' critique, (although I think it does not work for Koolhaas as he suggests), but very well for digital architectures: contemporary speed supersedes space as indifference supersedes difference.

The source for these digital designs is third nature. Third nature here is largely penetrating first and second nature, it dissolves any notion of ground, context or collectivity. Ground in the *City of the Captive Globe* generates difference, ground in blobs generates stasis, autogenesis, they take on the literal quality of Koolhaas' plots; a solid block of granite. It at the same time dissolves the notion of the human body as a living organism. Virtual reality promises a paradoxical contact at a distance, Grosz writes. Referring to Howard Rheingold and Randall Walser, the last one a well-known re-

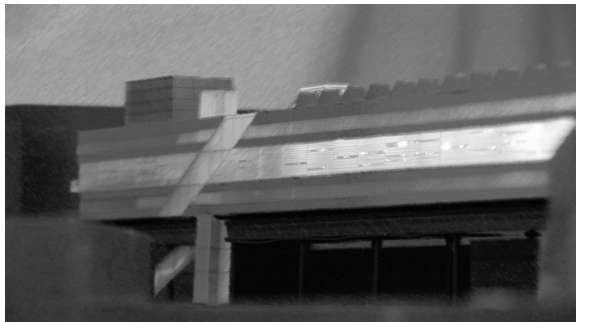
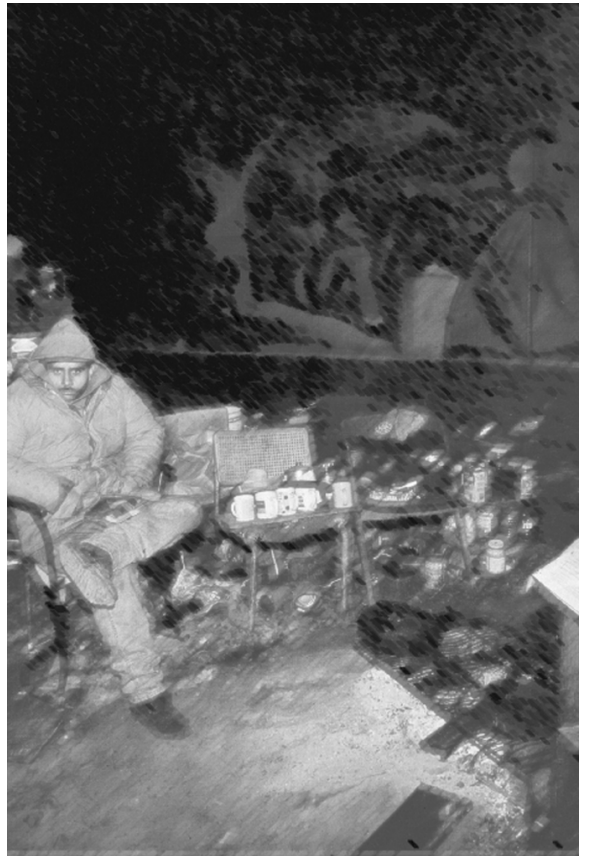
searcher in cyberspace technology, Grosz criticises the idea of dispensability or redundancy of the body, the suggested capacity of computer technology to transcend the body. To her this fantasy of disembodiment is that of autogenesis. A megalomaniacal attempt to provide perfect control in a world where things tend to become messy, complicated, or costly; to her it is a control fantasy, a luxury only affordable by the male subject. Like second nature, third nature is no doubt a social product. In architectural design computer technology has facilitated a shift from the traditional notions of ground. It is here where my doubts for architecture and urbanism begin. In architecture and urbanism we cannot do without 'ground' as a philosophical category. I think Deleuze and Guattari are right in saying that thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and earth. If we lose first and second nature, we lose the very notions of gender, sexuality, ethnic diversity, uneven distribution of wealth and class of second nature. Too easily the shift from harsh reality into the seemingly endless possibilities of the computer programmes is made, made without any interest for these categories. It is also a risk in Eisenman's Rebstock park where he shifts the notion of figure ground to one of assumed Deleuzian folding. We should realize that all spaces are *constructs* and *real*, including our digital worlds. Virtual space in Deleuze's sense is not an unforeseen possibility in the design, to be realized in a certain framing. It is about a question that will open up new uncharted territories, no doubt Eisenman's intention. First and second nature do not have more materialized substance than third nature, it is more than that collective hallucination restricted to the symbolic domains of social superstructures. It has that immense material base in communication satellites, fibre optic networks and the like that Manuel Castells has analysed.¹¹ But with this dissolving of figure ground, we have opened the door for the completely neutral concept of 'location'. 'Location' is a neutral datum for digital design. Foreign Office Architects (FOA) submitted a design for the future of the former World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. The undulating tower of bundled tubes was accompanied by these remarks: 'let's not even consider remembering... What for? We have a great site in a great city and the opportunity to have the world's tallest building back in New York.'¹² 'Will full amnesia' Reinhold Martin calls it, an active blindness to the historical conditions of which 9/11 was only one component. Digital design here is about the neo-liberal consensus regarding new opportunities opened up by techno-corporate globalization, he writes. The location of these constructions is nowhere, they might be anywhere. It is like that complexity of movement in Koolhaas international airports, they are for the greater part interchangeable.

Conclusion

For my conclusion I want to briefly go back to a design we did years ago for a site in Manhattan. It was a homeless shelter situated upon the old Amtrak line in the Meat Market district at Washington Street. I had a film made to show what the procedures in my book were about. The film itself is converted to a highly complex digital exercise where a simulated Situationists drift (*dérive*) through the Meat Market district is related to conceptual imagery coming from Rem Koolhaas' Kunsthal in Rotterdam and Melnikov's Russian Constructivism. The imagery you see in the film is not used in an analogical way in the sense of comparison or typology, but in an abstract conceptual way referring to Modernists perfection and its anxiety with imperfection which to my mind is addressed in the Kunsthal. The film is basically a narrative of a walk through the market area, including at the same time flashes of the virtual state of the shelter concept, transforming virtuality into a constituted reality in film. There is no suggestion of complexity in the drawings or in the model as in Eisenman since it looks all quite clear, a long building on a former Amtrak line. In my book *The Socius of Architecture* I mentioned we were heading for limitlessness on street level with this shelter. Digital techniques are operating on a notion of limitlessness also, but here expansiveness is on the level of the computer programmes and the media involved. The key difference is in the way we perceive architecture, to think of *architecture as a medium*, rather than as *an art of shelter*. For me it is the last one, I believe we have to think architecture in relation to 'ground', the body and the world. For the majority of people

in the streets it is just a long building, a train would be the first association, it literally sits upon a railroad track. The long windows at night will most likely give the impression of an abandoned Amtrak car arriving at its destination. But there is more to it. We found our inspiration in an analysis from Michael Hays on Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer. The repetition of sameness in the shelter is what Michael Hays, analysing Hannes Meyer's Co-op Vitrine calls 'a crucial reversal of standard Marxist aesthetics'. It is the mechanization, rationalization and commodification and their psychological consequences, that are *recommended* as the raw material of a critical aesthetic practice.¹³ For Meyer, Hays writes, aesthetic practice must submit to reification. These theoretical positions are not there to be translated or retroactively fabricated in the image of what it resembles, I use the proposals in my book as frameworks of visibility. 'Framework' means an effort to make visible the by definition formless and un-framable of the sublime,—it raises the question of what forms and frames this formless in architectural practices that are by definition involved in form(ation). Or, in the words of Žižek, 'the proper site of production is not the virtual space as such, but, rather, the very *passage* from it to constituted reality, the collapse of the multitude and its oscillations into reality—production is fundamentally a limitation of the open space of virtualities, the determination and negation of the virtual multitude'.¹⁴

I see this 'passage' or 'mediation' as a possible 'ground' in Scott Lash his conception. It is produced by a possible 'actualisation of the virtual', the to my mind in formal architecture dormant affect of the sublime.



Notes:

- 1 Hunch no 11, *Rethinking Representation*.
- 2 Timothy Luke, *Simulated Sovereignty, Telematic Territoriality: the political economy of cyberspace*, in *Spaces of Culture, City, Nation, World*, Sage publications 1999, edited by Mike Featherstone & Scott Lash, p. 27ff.
- 3 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social, An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press 2005, p. 44.
- 4 Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT 2001, p. 176.
- 5 David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, University of California Press 2000, p. 215.
- 6 Scott Lash, *Another Modernity, A Different Rationality*, Blackwell 1999, p. 232.
- 7 Elizabeth Grosz, see note 4, p. 40.
- 8 Peter Eisenman, *Unfolding Events: Frankfurt Rebstock and the Possibility of a new Urbanism*, in: *Unfolding Frankfurt*, Ernst & Sohn 1991, p. 9.
- 9 Eisenman's critique is on architecture theory's neglect of the *event structure* in architecture. He might be right there, but I think it is not only a question of addressing the topic of the event structure, but also the way we write about it. It is not only about an open mind for fleeting events, but very much about a fleeting way of writing about these events. For a great part architecture history has been focussed on what Eisenman calls the figure ground relationship. Events however go further than just the 'function' of a plan. Events go deeper into the structure of a plan, they form it for the greater part as I tried to show in my *Versailles and the Mechanics of Power*, O10 Publishers 2003.
- 10 Bruno Latour, see note 3, p. 39.
- 11 Manuel Castells, *The Informational City. Information Technology, Economic Restructuring and the Urban Regional Process*, Blackwell 1989.
- 12 Reinhold Martin, *Harvard Design Magazine, Critical of What? Toward a utopian realism*, Spring Summer 2005, p. 106ff.
- 13 Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject, The architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer*, MIT 1992, p. 52–53.
- 14 Slavoj žižek, *Organs without Bodies, On Deleuze and Consequences*, Routledge 2004, p. 20.